



All I Want is You by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: Juno AU: Facing an unplanned pregnancy, seventeen-year-old Jane 'El' Hopper is determined to make the most of a bad situation. All she needs is her best friend Max, her accidental baby daddy Mike, and a nice couple to adopt the kid she's carrying.

1. One

"You know, I've wanted this for a long time."

It hadn't been boredom, definitely not. If anything, she'd call it planned recklessness – the level of which she's still a little unsure of.

And it's not like she'd tricked him into it, or even had to do much convincing. He'd even been a little too eager, maybe. (Not that she blames him.)

They'd been in his living room, alone and unsupervised; his sisters out and his parents away. It's not like there was much else to do that day, anyway. Her soap operas sucked and his breath smelt of minty fresh Tic Tacs and there was no way she wasn't going through with it.

(It's not like she'd intended to have sex right there in his living room, with the evening sun seeping through the cracks in the blinds, with the television on mute.)

(It's not like she'd planned to kiss him and have him wait – in all his scrawny pride and glory – in that damn chair as she undressed.)

(It's not like she'd intended to drop her panties to the floor with a blush and a gasp – or even like she'd wanted to – and she definitely hadn't planned on having to crawl into his lap and straddle him.)

It had just happened, and...

"I know." She'd told him, her hands winding around his neck as her forehead pressed into his, "I could sense it."

Brown curls kept falling in her face, and she'd tried brushing them away at first, tucking her hair behind her ears. But eventually his lips had moved from her neck to her mouth, and her own had been plump against his, and she'd suddenly been too distracted to give a shit.

He'd been all pale skin and black hair, warm eyes and wide smile, and goddamn it, she'd lost herself in him.

She'd been long gone by the time he kissed her neck and whispered a soft, "My wizard."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't everyone's favorite teen mom." Steve leans over the counter, hands thumping on the glass surface. He picks up an M&M from the awfully scratched metal bowl beside the till, flicks it in her direction. "You here for another test, mamasita?"

El dodges the sweet, eyes rolling before they settle on his hands, distracting herself, "I think the last one was broken."

"Third test today, squirt. Your Eggo's definitely preggo, no doubt about it." Steve pushes his hair back with one hand, the other still rummaging through the bowl of peanut chocolates, "Maybe your baby daddy's got super swimmers for sperm. Varsity, right?" He plops a handful of the M&Ms in his mouth, wide open as he chews them just to tick her off a little bit more.

(Boyfriend, no.) (Varsity, yes.)

She stops herself from pulling a face, instead choosing to fold her arms over her chest and do the same with her legs. Damn, that was a lot of liquid. "I just drank half my weight in milk, so, unless you want me to breathe on you-"

"You know where the lav is." Steve reaches back, the wheels of the old office chair he's propped a sneaker up on squeaking as it slides across the tiled floor. He grabs the restroom key from a shelf, circling his fingers through the big hoop before he hands it over to her.

"Thanks, big guy." El snatches the over-sized wooden plaque from his hand, the two keys on the ring jingling as she hurries over to the back of the store, rubber soles of her Converse loud.

"And don't forget to pay for that pee-stick, champ. I don't need my boss asking me why I'm running a family planning centre out of his break-room."

Ignoring him, El slips the door to the restroom open with ease, having done so twice already that morning. She locks the door, tosses

the gigantic keyring down into the shabby little sink before she shuts herself in the small cubicle.

Once the lid is pulled up and she's untucked her sweater from the waist of her jeans, she sits herself down on the toilet. She forces her legs close together for a moment as she tears into the box, ripping the already frayed edges of the pale purple packaging.

El spreads her legs a little, positions herself in such a way that the stick can be held quite steadily below her crotch without her having to get pee on herself.

When she's sure it's wet (not ready), she pulls the stick away, waves it up and down a tad before plopping it back down on top of the box it came out of.

After peeing (like, really, peeing), and readjusting her clothes, she washes her hands, grabs the damn stick and kicks the restroom door open.

Steve's still out front, but he's watching the doorway where some blonde girl has just walked out, clearly admiring her ass.

He whips back around when he hears her in the cold drinks fridge, and there's a grin on his face when as she approaches reaches the counter, sliding a box of Eggos over the glass. He seems to take that as a sign.

"Ring me up." She eyes him carefully out of one eye, still focusing on the white stick in her left hand.

"What's the prognosis, champ? Up the duff and down in the dumps or what?"

"I don't know yet, it's still- Nope." Three minutes must be up because there's a plus sign where she'd hoped for a minus, "Crap."

Steve picks up the box of waffles, using them as an excuse to peer closer and read the result, too. "Yeah, that ain't no bun that can be un-baked, young grasshopper." He nods, bumps her elbow with his clenched fist, "Your positivity ain't exactly on par with that stick's. Not that I blame you. It's so..."

"Unholy?"

"I was gonna say urine-covered."

"Thanks for the King." El gestures down to the fast food bag ripped open on the hood of Max's car. Burgers and fries and two sodas.

The redhead shrugs, gazing off into the distance. She curls her legs up under her, shorts riding up her thighs and El watches as her skin shivers from the cool air.

"You wanna hear something depressing?"

"Go for it."

"I'm pregnant."

"Shit, for real?"

"Yeah. Yeah, for real, and it's totally Wheeler's."

"Yikes." She slurps at her soda, the straw reaching the bottom of the cup, "Are you sure you didn't just eat too much at lunch yesterday? It's probably a food baby. Put too much mayonnaise on those earthy french fries." She slams her cup down, toys with the straw between her fingertips.

"No, it's not, because I took like three tests and none of them showed a little spud baby." El tells her, leaning back against the hood, "It's like a proper person." She glances down, reaching for the wrapped burger rather than her belly.

"Not yet." Max points out, chewing at her bottom lip. She tosses her hair behind her shoulders.

"You're oddly chill about this."

"Wait, I didn't think you- Dude, you're serious?" Max's eyes widen and she sits up, the heels of her shoes slipping from the hood, kicking her legs out straight.

"Yeah, it's all very un-tubular." El's brows knit but she smiles when Max lets out an 'oh my god!'.

Turning to face face her, Max smirks, "What was it like boning Wheeler's bony bod?" She snorts at her own question, hides her mouth by holding up a couple of ketchup-dipped fries.

"Magnificent."

"Oh, geez."

"Yeah."

"What are you gonna do about it though? Do you want me to call Planned Parenthood? Because I had to do that for Stacy when her balls dropped and she hung up mid-appointment?"

"No, I'm just gonna let it stew for awhile. Besides, you need a parents' note for that."

"Get Lucas to fake one."

"Maybe." El seems to consider it for a second, eyes downcast on the gravel beneath the car, "I need your help with something."

"What?"

"Look, you know I'd help you bury a body if I had to, but why the hell are we doing this?" Max huffs, blowing a strand of hair from out of her face.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Fine." She sighs, follows the brunette as she steps into a dry patch of grass, lowering herself down to drop the La-Z-Boy.

"How did this even happen? I mean, I know you say he's magnificent. But, what, did you get bored one day and decide to bang the golden child of the cul-de-sac, glove-free?"

"It was premeditated."

"The bambino?"

"The faux boredom."

"What, and you screwed him in... Ew." Max rubs her hands down her sides, flapping them around. "How long ago did you plan this?"

"I didn't planned this. I planned, you know," El shrugs, smiling slightly, "Like, two years ago."

"You love him?"

"I'm in a fragile state of mind right now so you can't ask me that."

"You love him." Max snickers until she feels one of the chair cushions whack her over the back of the head, "Dude!"

"Shut up."

"Whatever." She shakes her head, throws an arm around El's shoulders, "I don't know what this is but it seems fittingly nerdy."

"Hey."

"Hi." Mike walks across the front slowly, one hand wrapped around the strap of his sports bag.

"Your sweater's really green today." El informs him, nodding in his direction. She lifts her hand up to her face, takes a bite of the uncooked Eggo between her fingers.

Mike glances down at the sweater beneath his hoodie, the green and white stripes bright and bold, even more so than usual (because that's apparently possible). "Yeah, my mom uses color safe bleach."

"Go Karen."

"Yeah." He tugs at the zipper of his hoodie, eyeing her closely, "Hey. Uh, why is- Why is my dad's chair out here?"

"Recognize it, huh?" El's eyebrow raise as she taps the arms of the

chair repeatedly, smile wide. She uncrosses her legs, leaning back in the La-Z-Boy.

Mike pulls a face, confusion clear on his face, "I mean you stole it out of my living room so, you know, yeah." He shrugs, pulls his backpack closer as his sports bag sways in his other hand. "What is this, El? I have practice."

"Guess what?"

"I don't, uh..." His shoulders rise and fall and he frowns, "What? I don't know." There's a smile working its way onto his face though - and she's pretty sure it's gonna drop soon.

There's a pause then, and she looks everywhere but at his face, "I'm kinda pregnant." El takes another bite of the Eggo, eyes moving up to stare at him suddenly, brown and wide and- Shit.

Yeah, any hint of a smile is gone. The corners of his mouth turn down, but his lips remain parted. He gulps, swallowing the heaviest breath she's probably ever seen him inhale, "What are we gonna do?"

The bag in his hand falls to the ground then, and she's honestly tempted to laugh at the cliché. Mike steps closer to her, slow and unsteady.

"I was gonna just, you know, deal with it the way we unholy folk do. Because, well, I don't really want the baby that comes with the pregnancy."

"Right, yeah. I mean, when my mom got pregnant, she had my little sister so.. I guess that's typically what happens." He nods, mostly to himself (she can tell).

His face is damn near unreadable though and El furrows her brow, leaning up on her elbows in the chair. "Is that good with you?"

Mike's eyes widen and he just gapes at her. He seems to ingest in her words for a moment or so, and then he nods (again), with a slow blink "Whatever you think is best."

"Right. Yeah." El stands up then, and she sighs, "It was a dumb idea to

have sex in the first place." There's a slight shrug to her shoulders as she picks up her bag and the box of Eggos at her feet.

She's by his mailbox by the time he finally asks, "Whose idea was it?"

"See you in school." She waves at him quickly, face clear of any expression.

Shit.

Mike just watches as she goes, hurrying down the path until she rounds a corner. He grips his backpack tighter in his fist, cheeks flushed from either the cool air or surprise (he can't decide).

"Whose idea was it?"

2. Two

"You guys do walk-ins?"

"Does this look like a Supercuts?"

The girl sat behind the reception desk can't be much older than twenty-years-old and, by the way she pops her gum with a bubble and a bang, El thinks she'd rather be anywhere else.

"I don't wanna know what you're here for, but if you're here for what I think you're here for then you need to sign this."

She pushes thick, matted black locks over her shoulder, reveals a patch of buzzed hair just above her ear. She reaches beneath the desk, pulling up a piece of paper that she attaches to the empty clipboard lay out in front of her.

Picking it back up, the older girl extends the board out to El with the fakest of smiles, "Your parents must be so proud."

El whips the clipboard right out of her hand, plucking a pen from the pot beside the computer screen, a game of Solitaire pretty visible on screen.

"Can I, like... book an appointment?"

"I mean, yeah." The girl - whose name is Kali (it's sloppily written on her name-tag) – says, and she looks up at El with disdain, "What are you, like a week late or something?"

"Like two months."

"Oh. You only get so long, you know."

"Obviously."

"Obviously." Kali copies, mocking, "Pretty soon that thing's gonna have fingernails and a heartbeat."

"What?"

Kali only nods, eyeing her as though she's some kind of wise savant herself, "True story." She presses a few keys on the pad, moving her game along, "Didn't you take sex ed?"

"A heartbeat?"

"And fingernails."

El has half a mind to drop the damn clipboard right there, to run for the hills and book a train to Chicago or something.

(Fingernails, seriously? Jesus!)

Instead, she glances down at the blank sheet of paper, blindly running her eyes over each and every word. Then she places it back down on the desk and slides her hands into the pockets of her dark windbreaker.

El bounces up and down on her Converse, watching as the laces jingle with every move.

(Abort. Abort. Abort.)

(No. Don't abort.)

"Fair enough." Kali pulls the board away, not even glancing up at El before she's sliding a bowl toward her, "Hey, take some free condoms. They're raspberry and apple."

"Isn't it a little late for condoms?"

"Yeah, but like, what if you need one in nine months? Then what? I make my boyfriend wear them every time we screw so his junk smells like a fruit salad."

"Fresh."

(Crap.)

She can't get out of there quick enough.

"I'm gonna give it up." She uncaps her bottle of water, takes one long swig before continuing, "Like, to a family."

"You mean like a raffle?"

She rolls her eyes at Max's question, flicking a couple droplets of water in the other girl's direction with a soft giggle, "No, for adoption. People are always after free babies, right?"

"Yeah," the redhead nods, but her face contorts into some kind of disgust at the same time, "You know, they're usually the same people who have like ten restraining orders filed against them. And they're not allowed anywhere near a school or a playground."

"You know what I mean."

Max smiles, crumbling up a piece of her dry bread roll, "You should check the paper. Don't they have ads for that kind of thing? Like a 'desperately seeking spawn' section or something?"

"Or I'll just advertise on Craigslist." El says, stuffing a forkful of lettuce into her mouth, wincing as she bites into a juicy piece of tomato. "Maybe a stork will come and pick it up and we can, like, pimp up that old story adults try to sell to kids."

"What, like there's a tech-savvy stork that's gonna see your Craigslist posting?" She slides one leg over the bench, moving to stand up. "Hang on." Max hurries off then, without warning, out of the cafeteria and into the school hallway.

Great.

Waiting for her friend to come back, El starts messing with her food. She plucks at the soggy salad with her fork, repeatedly stabbing the lettuce like she's worked up about something. The squeaking of the plastic fork against the greens start grinding on her nerves after a moment though, so instead she opts to people watch - a favorite pastime.

The lunch ladies are bickering about something in the back, still ladling out soup and mashed potatoes. The popular kids are hanging out by the windows; that star quarterback flexing what El can only

assume are supposed to be his totally rockin' biceps.

Disinterested, she turns towards the former AV Club's table with a scoff, her eyes narrowing in on Dustin. He's messing with his hat, spinning it around in circles on his cushiony head of hair. Either he's bored or he's trying to make it seem like it's floating or- Whatever.

Dustin himself is focused on something Mike is saying, and El decides that maybe he's the reason she'd turned to them in the first place; not for Dustin's lame hat trick.

He's pretty deep in conversation - with himself mostly, because Dustin is otherwise preoccupied with his hat. The curly-haired boy nods and smiles every so often, replies when Mike gives him a pause to, and El kind of misses spending her lunch break with them.

Mike keeps throwing his hands up, his elbows sliding back and forth along the greasy lunch table. He pushes his hair back every once in a while, and there's a grin on his face whenever Dustin laughs at something he said.

(It's been a solid day now and she's pretty certain he's yet to tell anyone.)

(But, damn, his hoodie looks soft today.)

"Okay." Max slides back into her seat then, having reappeared with a newspaper in hand. She kicks her legs up on the bench. "Debate nerds always have a paper on hand."

"And you know the debate team how?"

(The basketball team is more up Max's alley.)

"Dustin. Which means, by proxy, I know some of those other losers." She shrugs, "That dude comes with perks, lemme tell you."

(A perk: he's always with Mike.)

She scans through the newspaper in her hands, eyeing every page so fast that El isn't sure how she doesn't go cross-eyed.

"Ah, gotcha." And Max snorts back a laugh, "Christian couple wish to welcome unwanted bastard into their circle of love'."

"Pass."

"Circle jerk of spunk, more like." The other girl laughs, stretching an arm out, "Lesbian fiancées seek healthy surrogate'? Who knew Hawkins was so pro-gay? Yay."

"Not a surrogate."

"OK, here's one. 'Religiously indifferent wealthy couple seek infant to fill sinkhole-sized void in their lives'." Her eyes widen, her face bright, "Nice! El, all that's missing is your little bastard!" Max exclaims as she flips the newspaper around to show El the ad.

The brunette toys with her yogurt, watching as the pink substance plops off her spoon and back into the cup, "Neat. Do they want a takeaway?"

"You should call them." Max holds down one side of the page then, tearing around the ad until it rips off in a messy shape. She slides it over the table to El, eyes still scanning the paper, "Maybe they'll buy it then you won't have to work next summer."

"Jesus, it's not like it's an old desk I'm selling out of my garage. I don't want them to buy it. I just want them to adopt it. As long as it's someone who needs it and wants it and doesn't wanna skin it to make a lamp, that's good."

"Okay," Max raises a brow, folding the paper closed. She curls her legs up beneath her, soles of her sneakers digging into the backs of her thighs. "Have you spoken to Wheeler the Formidable Wiener yet?"

El shrugs, holding his gaze to the cutout in front of her. She drops her spoon to pick up the ad, considering it for a second, "Not since bio yesterday. I had to stop myself from making like, twenty jokes. The irony was too much." She pockets the piece of paper, keeps her hands in the pockets of her blue jacket.

"Not irony, but-"

"You spend too much time with Lucas."

"And you don't spend enough time with Mike." Max challenges, "Maybe if you spent a little less time daydreaming about his lanky ass then you'd have had more time to actually buy rubbers."

"Speaking of which..." El holds up a finger, reaching for her backpack on the floor. She plops it down on the bench next to her, rummaging through it until she finds what she's looking for. El grabs a fistful of the foils, zipping up her bag, before she drops them on the table.

"Enjoy."

"Jesus, what, did you rob the clinic?"

"No." The brunette crosses her arms over her chest, leaning across the table as Max picks up a condom, "That weird punk girl at reception wouldn't let me leave without one."

"So you took 'em all?" She grins, "Ew. Apple and raspberry?"

"Raspberry and apple," she corrects, "Apparently, it makes wiener smell like fruit salad."

"Yum." Max closes her eyes and tosses her head back, mouth open wide. She sighs with a slight moan, dramatic and false, and brings her head back down to face El, "Yuck."

The redhead surrounds the dozen packets with her hands then, and she scoops them up in her arms with a sheepish smile, "Not like you're gonna need them." She drops them into her open book-bag, kicking it aside.

"Seems so, Maximo. Who needs condoms anyway when you can just gawk at the cautionary whale of Hawkins High?" She glances down at her belly, half-expecting to see it expanded or swollen.

"Best contraceptive you can get," Max reaches over for El's yogurt, "You're gonna be a nine-month reminder around here that sex kills, you know."

"What exactly did it kill?" El eyes her friend skeptically, licking her

lips with a tilt of her head, "Other than my bladder and undeniable allure?"

"I don't know, it just sounded good. Whatever, anyway," Max lets the plastic spoon hang from her lips, tapping her fingers on the end, "You need to tell Hops your Pops. And Joyce."

"I know."

"And you should let Wheeler know his sausage spawn is gonna be handed over to a couple of childless suckers."

"I know."

"Wheeler!"

(Fuck.)

Daring to look over at him, El finds that Mike is already staring at her, confusion pretty clear on his face. (Damn, he acts quick.) His brows knit, and his smile drops, and Max is calling him over again, hands cupped around her mouth so his name echoes through the whole cafeteria.

He stands, Dustin following, and the two boys are at their table in next to no time.

"Yeah?" Mike fidgets, hands slipping into the pockets of his hoodie, his shoulders haunching forward. He's staring down at the floor, or his shoes, or wherever the hell they land – his eyes anywhere but on El's face now.

Max twirls her spoon around, "Who you taking to prom?"

"What?" He scowls, attention suddenly raised. "Not you."

"Wasn't suggesting it, dick-hole." She teases, "I was just asking."

"Well, I don't..." he starts, pauses to shrug like that's his answer.

Dustin rests his arm on the taller boy's shoulder then, and he pushes his head up against Mike's arm, "You ladies need invites?"

"No. El can't go anyway. She's got other plans that night."

"Oh. Uh, cool?" Dustin offers.

(Have they all forgotten that prom is months away?)

(Oh. Right.)

"Hey, you know, Steve said you were hanging around the store the other day. Like, a lot." Dustin says, looking down at El with a smirk, "You trying to hit on my big brother?"

"He's not your brother," she reasons, "and, no. No, I was just... thirsty."

"Yeah, he said you kept coming in to use the restroom."

"Okay."

"Dude." Mike nudges him, waiting until his friend lifts his arm from his shoulder before he moves to sit beside El. He seems to contemplate his next words slowly, "Do you... Can we talk?"

"Talk here, Wheeler." Max cuts in.

"What? No." Mike scowls, tussles dark hair, "Not in front of you."

"Why, what's wrong with me?"

"You're, like, mean." He tries, turning to face El again, "Please?"

"I would but... I don't want to." She tells him, scratching at the cap of her bottle of water, watching as the blue plastic slightly chips, "Maybe tomorrow. You know, if I'm not spewing my guts up and shitting my guts out."

Max snickers, and the bell rings just as Mike goes to reply, leaning forward on his elbows. As the redhead stands, El makes to follow her, clearing her tray.

She waits until Max has walked off, just a few steps ahead of her, before lowers herself back down to Mike's level, whispers a simple,

"Burger phone," in his ear.

"You still have that thing?"

"It's like the coolest phone in the universe, why wouldn't I still have it?"

"Dad. Joyce."

"What is it, kid?" Hopper groans across the room, watching as she settles her bag down on the floor beside the front door. "I gotta be back at the station in thirty."

"Dude, just rip off the bandaid." Max crinkles her nose, nodding over to the sofa where El's dad now has an arm around his wife's shoulders, trying to snatch the cigarette from her hand.

"Yeah, kid. Rip off the bandaid." He repeats with the slightest of chuckles, not even sparing El a glance. He successfully pries the smoking fag from Joyce, lifting it to his lips casually. "What gives, Jane bug?"

Without blinking, El just stares straight ahead, focusing on the space between her elders, "I'm pregnant."

She tries for a smile, finds herself unable to do anything other than snarl.

(Crap.)

"Oh, no." Before anyone can stop her, Joyce is stealing the butt back from her husband, putting it out with urgency. "Crappy hell."

The girl gnaws at her lip for a moment, watching as her words sink into her parents' faces – Hopper's face flushed white, Joyce's flushed red.

"But, don't worry... I'm going to give it up for adoption." She says, "We already found the perfect couple and they're gonna pay for everything. And they're not gonna make me join a cult or anything, I don't think, so..."

"Yeah," Max throws in, leaning her elbows back against the windowsill, crossing her legs in front of her, "The guy's only good for shooting blanks but he sounded nice on the phone."

El kicks her then, right in the shin, and the redhead pulls a face as she moves to stroke her leg.

"You're pregnant?" He asks after he's pulled another cigarette out of his packet, the box almost scrunched up in his fist.

If he's pissed, Hopper's tone doesn't do anything to let it be known. His eyes are wide, but he's leaning back with a cigarette hanging from his lips in such a relaxed, cool way that El's almost certain he's ready to fall asleep. He blows smoke out from the corner of his mouth, doesn't lift his gaze off of her abdomen.

She nods after a beat, a stare-down, slipping her hands into the front pockets of her windbreaker with a slight shrug, eyes focused straight ahead on her dad's face, trying to gauge his reaction, "Yeah, for now. But in thirty weeks or so, I'm just gonna shoot the thing out and we can pretend it never happened."

"Honey," The girl turns her attention to the woman on the other side of the sofa, Joyce's hand pressed up against Hopper's thigh - to hold him down or to calm herself. "You didn't tell us you were sexually active."

"Should I have?" El's brows furrow, "I wasn't exactly planning on being that, so... And what does that even mean? 'Active' like I can deactivate my, what, my libido if I want to? Because I want to."

Hopper sighs, and he raises his free hand to his head, thumb and forefinger rubbing his temples, "Who's the damn kid?"

"The baby?" She shifts from one foot to the other, shoots Max a look. The redhead shrugs, unapologetically no help at all. "I don't know, it's like... too tiny to tell right now." El tells them, watching as Joyce leans forward in her seat, elbows digging into her knees. Her feet bounce up and down rhythmically, and El continues, "Doesn't look like much but apparently it's got fingernails already so that's pretty neat."

"Fingernails?" Joyce pulls a face, snatches the cigarette from Hopper's fingers. She takes a drag, smacks her lips together, "Wow."

"No." Hopper shifts up now, and he stares back and forth between the two teens, squinting in Max's direction as though she had something to do with it. "Who's the father, kid?" At least now he sounds aggravated.

"Oh." She purses her lips, "It's, umm, Mike Wheeler."

"Wheeler?" Hopper snickers, shaking his head as his eyes close, his head ducking.

El frowns, "What?"

"I just didn't think he had it in him." He says, barely even attempting to conceal his amusement, a grin pretty clearly making its way onto his face. His cheeks puff out, and his brows raise, but he grimaces when Joyce smacks him in the arm, her rings hitting him square on his funny bone. "Geez."

"I know, right?" Max cuts in, shoulders heaving as she grips the banister behind her, standing up straight, "I'm kinda proud of him." She folds her arms over her chest, nudging El in the arm.

"Not the word I would've used." Hopper tilts his head, shooting his wife a look, "More like 'impressed'."

"Oh, you're impressed?" Joyce whacks his arm again, face gaping in disbelief. "Jane, can you give us a minute?"

El nods, hands slapping against her overalls, "Sure." She looks to Max, "We'll just go grab a snack or something."

The redhead quickly picks up her book-bag from off of the floor by the window, and she swings it over her shoulder with a smile, "Isn't that like the cardinal rule of housing a Gremlin? Don't fucking feed it?"

With a roll of her eyes, El just grabs the other girl's elbow, pulling her around the wall separating the living room from the hallway, "I'm not housing a Gremlin. I'm just growing one."

When they're down the corridor and banging away in the kitchen cupboards, Joyce turns to her husband with wide eyes and an open mouth. She doesn't talk; staring Hopper down until he does.

"Did you see this coming?"

"No. I mean, I knew she was edgy but-" Joyce pauses to take a deep breath along with a drag of her cigarette, "I was hoping it was just vandalism or maybe she was giving heroine a go."

Hopper grumbles audibly then, his hands sliding up and down in thighs – either in irritation or something akin, "I would've preferred drugs. At least we could've locked her in a room until the itching stopped." He sighs, "Now we've gotta parent her and make sure she doesn't start drinking toilet cleaner or something."

Beside him, Joyce stabs her fag out, the right corner of her mouth curling up into a hopeful smile, "She's a tough cookie."

"I'm gonna punch that Wheeler kid in the pecker the next time I see him, I tell you." He shakes his head, eyes darkening, "Damn parents of his probably never told him what a condom was."

"He's seventeen, Hop. I think he knew what he was doing. They both did." She points out, "He's a sweet kid. I've known him since Will was a boy."

"Yeah, well, Will ain't exactly gonna go knocking someone's daughter up anytime soon, is he?" He quips, "Goddamn kids."

3. Three

"Jane," Joyce starts, and she rests a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder, keeping an eye on the road, "You can cry if you need to." She nods her head once, reassuring.

"You mean because I just, like, saw a M&M floating around in my belly, and TV taught us that that's the beautiful, so-called miraculous thing we call life?"

"Maybe."

"Well," El only frowns, and she sits up in her seat, feet sliding down from off of the dashboard, "Why would *I* cry about it?"

"I don't know," the older woman falters, and she taps one hand against the steering wheel, "Just, you know, if you feel overwhelmed or... or sad about anything."

"I don't feel much of anything." El tries for a smile then, but she can only grimace as her stomach breaks the silence for her, "Except for hunger, apparently. The kid's only nine weeks gestated and he's already a greedy little bastard."

"Have you told Mike?"

El nods, and she purses her lips, "Yeah. He got the gist of it. I told him to call me yesterday but then I never picked up, so I guess he's probably off cheesing again." She tells her stepmother with a shrug, casual and calm, "It's whatever."

"Why didn't you answer?"

"Because I already know what he'd say." She says, "He'd say something obnoxiously sweet and then I'd bust his balls about it for ten minutes until he got real serious and emo and I'd have to hang up because, you know, yikes, I don't need that kind of pressure right now."

"What kind of pressure?"

"The 'are we boyfriend-girlfriend?' kind."

"I thought", and Joyce frowns, "You aren't together?"

"Not exactly." El's nose crinkles, "I mean, *really*. Actually, not ever. I kind of just let him feel me up in the AV room a couple of times until I gave in to the pheromones."

Joyce's tone of voice isn't condescending, but she isn't exactly *proud* when she says, "Best not tell Hop any of this." She sighs, but there's a hint of amusement on her face, "I don't think he needs to know he's raising a sexual deviant."

"I'm not a deviant." El opines, hand flying out to tinker with the radio stations. She curls her legs up beneath her on the cloth seat, free arm hanging out the window as she changes the station to a folksy song, "I boned down with one nerd, Joy. I don't think I'm gonna have to start embroidering red A's on my clothing just yet." The girl places her hand flat against her tummy, lifting her gaze to stare out the front window. "Hey, Joy?"

"Yeah?" Joyce blinks, and she puts the indicator on as they come to stop at the lights. When El doesn't reply, she shoots the girl a quick look, finding her rubbing her stomach and licking her lips suggestively, "Am I picking up Max on the way?"

El nods, eagerly, and she lowers the volume on the radio to lean over and kiss Joyce on the cheek, "Thank you."

Max shoves a French fry past her lips, and she keeps it between her teeth. "How big is it?"

"I don't really know how it works, but, it's probably somewhere between a Skittle and a fingernail right about now." El scrunches her face, and she slurps at her milkshake.

Max rests her elbows on the table, "So it looks like a fingernail and it *has* fingernails? Gruesome."

El giggles, and she steals a fry from her friend's tray, "I think the fruity condom girl was lying about that part but..." She shrugs,

leaning back in her seat with a deep breath, "I'm so full, Maximo."

The redhead just pulls a piece of the bun away from her cheeseburger and she flicks it in the other girl's direction, "Maybe if you hadn't of eaten half of my fries, you wouldn't look like you're in third trimester already."

"What the hell? You're supposed to tell me I look pretty or that I'm... you know, glowing or some shit." El shakes her head.

"No, that's Wheeler's job." Max tells her with a smirk, "It's on him to lie and tell you that you don't look like dog crap when you do." She nods, and then she wags a finger around, "Hey, please tell me I get to come with when you meet the impotent twosome next week."

"If only. Hop's already filled the position."

"You're taking your dad to meet the people buying your unwanted fetus? That's some dark shit." Max says.

"They're not buying it, they're adopting it."

"Wah, wah. That's just like when you 'buy' a puppy but you've gotta say you adopted it from the shelter because it's *inhumane* otherwise."

El reaches over for a final fry then, and she grins, dipping it in the puddle of ketchup she's made on her burger wrapper, "Speaking of which, I need to call Mike."

"Why?" Max pulls a face, and she wipes mustard from her bottom lip with the pad of her thumb, "Oh, my god, you're not taking him too, are you? It'd be like a traveling circus." The girl snorts, "Actually, you know, that's not a bad idea. You could tour the country, raising awareness and shit."

"Awareness? It's a pregnancy, not a freakin' viral disease."

She says, "Idiocy catches, you know. That stuff spreads like wildfire. It's, like, worse than HIV."

"Are you comparing my pregnancy to AIDS?" El questions.

"No." Max starts, and she raises a brow, dodging a thrown fry when she says, "I'm just saying they both spread because of a total disregard to condoms. You're just lucky it was Wheeler's premature body fluids that infected you and nothing else."

"First of all, who said anything about him prematurely ejaculating?" The brunettes quips, "And, second, do you even know anything about biology besides how to navigate your way around a penis? He didn't *infect* me."

"Look, I'm not saying the kid's gonna burst out of your stomach or some shit, but-"

"Oh, that'd be cool." El snaps her fingers, smiling at the reference.

Max nods, wide-eyed, "Yeah, no, it would, wouldn't it?"

"Mom, I'm heading out." The boy shouts as he comes charging down the staircase, backpack slung over one shoulder. It's only when he reaches the bottom of the stairs that he finds his mom already stood in the doorway to the kitchen, right hand on her hip as her left foot taps against the carpeted floor.

"It's a school night." Karen Wheeler points out, brow raised in curiosity, "Where are you going?"

"Uh," Mike pauses, and he reaches down to snatch a fresh cookie from the container she's tucked under one arm, the lid nearby on the kitchen table, "Just to Will's." He offers the lousiest of smiles, eyes widening as his lips curl.

The woman just sighs, watching as he tightens the strap of his backpack, chocolate-chip cookie caught between his teeth. "Is that," she starts, pausing until Mike looks back down at her, attentive, "Is that girl going to be there?"

"That *girl* being his sister?"

"Step-sister." Karen corrects him, as though it's of any importance.

"I don't know," Mike shrugs, and it's a well-sold lie, "What does that

matter anyway?" He swallows a breath, taking another bite of the cookie as his mom continues to stare up at him.

(Damn it.)

"You know how I feel about her."

Mike rolls his eyes, and his hand wraps tighter around the strap of his backpack then. He tries to not let his fist go *too* white as he grips the nylon in frustration, "And you know how I feel about her."

"She's just... She's strange, Michael." His mom tells him, "Always hanging out with that Maxine girl. That one's trouble, too."

"Max?" Mike squints, and he has to bite his tongue, "Max, who's dating one of my best friends?" His brows knit, and he's holding back a full-on scowl now, "Do you like any of my friends who aren't on the team?"

"That Jane girl isn't your friend, Michael. She uses you because you're smart and you know it. She's being holding you back for years now." The woman informs him, all knowingly with a shake of her head.

(As though he hasn't known Jane since he was eight years old.)

Karen leans against the door, "Stay home for dinner." She offers with a wiggle of her brows, "We can order pizza if you want. Holly will love it."

"No." He doesn't mean to, but his tone isn't as *nice* as he wants it to be, as it usually is. "No, I'm going to Will's." Mike tells her, resolute, "I'll be back later." Reaching forward, he quickly snatches one more cookie from the box before she can stop him.

(Will's totally not home.)

"Joyce let you in?"

Mike looks up once he's shut the door behind him, taking in the blanket fort built she's built in her bedroom. Her bed's been pushed to the side, as far back against the wall as it will go, and she's pulled

two - what look to be - dining chairs out onto the fluffy rug in the middle of her room. There's a sheet hanging over the backs over the stools, and she's laid out some battery-powered twinkling lights on the plaid blanket she's spread out on the floor. There are two pillows by her head, and she's lay in the middle of them both, head flat on the rug.

Her curtains are drawn shut, the blinds open behind them, and the afternoon sun is still partially seeping into the room.

"Yeah." Mike's brows raise and he leans down to rest his backpack against the bottom of her bed, hands awkwardly sliding into his pockets, "She didn't say anything though. She just kind of let me in and walked off so..." He trails off, glancing around her bedroom in mild curiosity, taking in the movie posters and decorative stickers, "Did you do something different?"

"Oh." And El smiles then, flipping over onto her stomach so she can face him. "Max helped me with it like two weeks ago. We found an old can of paint outside that hobo dumpster near Old Cherry Lane." She licks her lips, nodding her head, "I think the blue was making me seasick."

"So you went with green?" Mike grins, running his hand down the patchy, messily painted emerald colored wall.

(His favorite color.)

"I was inspired."

Mike smiles, ducking his head as his cheeks flush. He doesn't the mention the fact that she never replied to his calls, didn't call him back herself until a day later.

"Or you saw an opportunity."

(Double entendre. Touché, Wheeler.)

El smiles, and she waves a hand about, "Either way, it's you-inspired," she says, "maybe you've tapped into my subconscious and we can do that thing they did in E.T."

"A psychic connection?"

She nods, "Yeah. It'd be cool," then stops, "Or, I don't know, maybe then it'd be more masturbation than intercourse."

"Are you okay?"

She blinks, staring up at him from her spot on the floor. "Way to kill the vibe, Wheels."

"What, I'm just," He approaches her slowly, two steps when he could have taken four, "Are you?"

(She almost feels bad for not feeling bad.)

"Yeah," El shrugs, "I mean, I'm fine. My body just isn't being very cooperative so don't expect, like, a hug or anything." She rolls over on the blanket, patting the space beside her as an invitation for Mike to come and join her. "Joyce took me to the doctor today."

He doesn't say anything, but the boy makes his way over to the fort, and he sits down beside her, all awkward long limbs and stiff shoulders as he ducks beneath the overhead sheet. Then he swallows, and breathes out, and she has half a mind to wrap her hand around his throat when his Adam's apple bobs, reminding her of that time she'd kissed him there - and it pisses her off.

"You can chill, you know?" She says, choosing instead to nudge him in the arm rather than strangle him, "It's not like I'm gonna be hitting you up for baby cash or anything. I found a couple." El lays back down properly on the duvet then, staring up at the ceiling of her fort as her lay flat at her sides.

"A couple of what?" He asks, voice almost muted, and he blinks as he turns to face her.

"A couple of ex-convicts who are gonna do me a solid and sell the thing on the black market. White babies are a hot commodity, I guess. Should bring in a pretty penny and they said they'd go halvesies with me so that's a plus." The girl grins, "I could probably get you a slice." She moves into a comfier position so she can turn and face Mike with drawn lips. She pulls at the edges of her short overalls,

fingernails catching on the frayed denim.

Mike rolls his eyes, shuffling over until his head is next to hers, taking over the pillow, "Have you met them?"

"The felons?"

"The... parents?" He squints, the space between his brows creasing in consideration, "The couple."

"Not yet." El tosses around for a second, stopping in when her arm comes into contact with Mike's chest. Her forehead is pressing against his chin, and she closes her eyes, "Had to make sure I was totally preggo before I got their hopes up. I'm seeing them next week. The wife's at some sort of resort for a few days. I don't know, I think she's one of those prissy, shiny types that likes highlights and happy endings."

"So you've spoken to them?"

"Only to the dude, over the phone. He sounded nice enough, a bit of a doormat maybe, but," she pauses, "Did you... did you want to have a say?"

(Shit.)

"Oh," Mike gulps, and she can hear his stop breathing momentarily. His hand on her waist slips down to her leg, and he squeezes her thigh absentmindedly, "No." She can feel his eyelashes flutter against her cheeks when she leans up, eyes still closed but seeking his warmth, "I think you know best. But, you know, I'm still *here*."

"For me." She finishes for him, cheeks rose, "I know, Mike. In case you couldn't tell, I'm kind of clinging to you like a koala at the moment. If you weren't here, I wouldn't have anyone to hold me."

"Like a koala?"

"Like a koala."

Mike snorts, and he cranes his neck to glance down at her then, pushing up on his elbows. He takes in the sleepy, familiar smile on

her lips, "Do you want me to leave?" He moves his hand up from the floor of the fort to her waist, purposely keeping his touch against the denim of her clothes and nowhere else.

"It doesn't matter." El tells him, and she peeks one eye open up at him, "It's not like Hop has anything to worry about anymore."

"Shit." The tall boy drops back down on the blanket down, and he gulps, stills when she shuffles closer into his side. "He's totally mad, isn't he?"

"He's surprised."

"That you got-"

"That you were the one who did it." El cuts him off, and she shrugs the shoulder not pressed against him, "But, like, if it wasn't you then I don't know who he thought it would've been." Before he can reply, she throws out, "And he's seen you at practice, so like he should know your little swimmers are just as fast as you are."

"Thanks."

"You're very welcome." She snuffles, snuffles closer until she practically on top of him. "We don't have to make this complicated, do we?"

"Isn't it already complicated?" Mike asks, honest, "I mean, not to sound like a total wastoid or anything, but we did dive right in at the deep end. You know, kind of like we skipped four steps." His voice is lowered, but she catches the small, nervous crack all the same.

The girl's smile falls, "Does it really count as skipping steps if we were never going to take them in the first place?" Her eyes flutter open then, and she turns her face into the crook of his neck. Her arm slides over his stomach, dipping past the hem of his sweater.

"Weren't we?"

(Crap.)

El ponders her thoughts for a moment, evening out her breath, "I

mean, I didn't think making out a few times meant we were on route to becoming lovers or anything." She teases, and thankfully he doesn't take it as badly as she thought he might.

Mike just inches his fingers up her thigh, scratching the short hems of her overalls, "Probably because you have a skewed outlook on what romance is supposed to be."

"We can blame the broken home for that one." She frowns, "Wait, you think romance is just me shoving my tongue down your throat and your hand groping my boob?" El smirks, peering up at him. She bends her knees, bringing her sock-clad feet up flat on the blanket, and she kicks at the string of lights as they tangle around her ankles.

"We're teenagers; that's like the very definition of romance."

"That's pretty effed up, you know."

"Doesn't mean it's not true." The boy mocks, "Blame the broken home."

"No, you can't play that card." El pinches his waist, over the sweater, "My mom left before I was six so I win by default. Your dad only bailed two years ago."

"And all I got was the lousy La-Z-Boy."

"What are you talking about, that thing is bitchin', son." El tells him, and she flips back over onto her back, flat against the duvet. "I'll take it. It'd go great with my dumpster paint splattered walls." She searches for his hand then, tugging on his wrist and he lets her.

"I'm pretty sure my mom would notice if it disappeared from the living room." He says, blank, and he casts her a look. "What are you thinking about?"

El sucks at her bottom lip, thinking, "What are doing for prom?"

"You know it's only October, right?"

The brunette makes some kind of noise, a huff, and then she nudges his shoulder with hers again, "Humor me."

"How?" Mike pulls a face, "I don't know what I'll be doing in, what, like, eight months?"

"Don't think about my situation, think about..." El dares a look up at him, staring at his mouth, "I don't know, think about who you're gonna bang one out with on prom night."

Mike doesn't say anything to that, and when his breathing slows and she knows she's said something wrong, El can't help but shove her foot even further into her mouth, "Oh, I know," El starts, and she crawls up the duvet so they're at eye-level, "What about Jennifer Hayes? You should go with Jennifer Hayes. Everybody loves Jennifer Hayes." She pokes him in the chest.

"What? No. I don't like Jennifer Hayes." Mike protests, and he wraps his hand around her wrist, careful and soft. His voice lowers and he smiles faintly, distantly, "She smells like soup. Have you ever smelled her?" He frowns, shaking his head, messy hair falling into his eyes, "I mean, her whole house smells like soup."

"You've been to her house?" El reaches up, brushing the hair from his eyes. She keeps her fingertips pressed to the curve of his ear, thumb against his jawline.

(She's totally *not* jealous.)

"I haven't been to her house. I've been outside her house." He explains, "Like, I just dropped off a casserole once because my mom made me, and it kinda smelled like onion soup."

"Maybe it was the casserole." She doesn't want to sound bitter, petty, but it just slips out.

(Fuck Jennifer Hayes.)

(Don't fuck Jennifer Hayes.)

Mike rolls his eyes, and he smooths one hand around her cheek, palm flat against her warm skin, "It wasn't the casserole. It was my mom's casserole, and they always smell delicious and you know it." His brows wiggle, playful, "Never like soup."

"Your mom hates me. She'd never make me soup."

"She doesn't hate you." Mike tells her, sincere as ever, "She just doesn't understand you."

"Still, she'd totally like it better if you went to prom with Jennifer Hayes. She could probably make you both a casserole before you left."

"And do we eat this casserole at my house or Jennifer Hayes' house?"

"Your house." El smirks, and she runs her hand from his face to his shoulder, "If you ate it at her house then it'd smell like onion soup."

"Well, what if I wanted to eat casserole here," his bottom lip twitches and he's staring at her mouth, "with you, instead?"

(Shit.)

"Then you'd be an idiot because I hate casseroles."

Mike smiles.

4. Four

"That's what you're wearing?"

El stops midway down the stairs at that, and she frowns, peering down at her outfit. She's wearing a stripy red t-shirt - stolen from Mike a short while back - and a pair of plain jeans that are rolled up around her ankles. And there's an polka-dot skirt tossed over her jeans, of course. "Looks like it." The girl shrugs, offering her dad a sideways glance when he remains stood with his arms folded, "Why?"

"Nothing."

"What am I supposed to wear, a freakin' ball gown or something? It's like a meet-and-greet or whatever." El says. Hopper just rolls his eyes, and he pulls his keys from his back pocket. "Are you wearing a *shirt*?"

"I always wear shirts." Her dad says, and he casually shifts from one leg to the other, tugging on one of his sleeves.

"Yeah," El starts, and she finally steps down from the stairs then, "but they're usually part of your uniform." She wiggles her brows, pokes him in the bicep with her index finger, "You trying to make a good impression, chief?"

The man only sighs, and he ruminates with his tongue in his cheek for a second, letting her repeatedly prod at his arm with a giggle. "I don't think it matters if I make a good impression, sprout. You've already proven I'm not a great parent."

"This isn't on you." She gestures down to her stomach, bright honey eyes leaving his, "This is just the work of two horny teenagers and a defective condom."

"So there *was* a condom?" Hopper asks, half in a mumble. He juggles his keys, heading for the front door.

"Obviously," El pulls a face, "I'm not a total tramp."

"Nah, you're just your father's daughter." Hopper chuckles, deep, and

he reaches over to ruffle her hair, curly strands falling from her messy ponytail. She swipes his hand away, nudging his side as they leave the house. Hopper reaches behind him to close the door as El heads down the front steps, taking long strides. "Hey, kid?"

The brunette whips around on her Converse then, gravel crunching below her feet as she twists, brows raising in curiosity, "Yeah, pop?"

"I'm proud of you, you know."

"For getting knocked up?" She squints, "I don't think any parent has ever said that to their underage high-schooler."

He rolls his eyes (again), and slips one hand into his jeans' pocket, "No." He stops at her level, a few steps away from the passenger side of the truck, "For deciding to do this. It's a good thing, what you're doing."

"I just figured if people wanted a baby so bad then they could just have mine. I mean, it's not like I'm gonna need it or anything."

Hopper closes his eyes, and his lips draw tight, "When did you get so dark?"

"I *am* my father's daughter."

"Shit, shit, shit." Dustin slides into the seat beside Mike, and he slams his hand down on the library table, "Shit!"

"What?" Mike scowls at him, turning in his chair as his shoulders raise, eyeing the curlier-haired boy carefully, "Please don't tell me you walked on a snail again." He says, "We're not having another funeral for a dead bug."

Dustin's eye widen then, and his lips part as though in a silent gasp, "You haven't heard?" He takes a deep breath, one that's maybe a tad too dramatic, Mike thinks. "Your girlfriend's pregnant."

Mike stills, arms lowering to lie his hands flat on the desk, "I don't have a girlfriend." He slumps in his seat, staring down at the scratched, Sharpie-riddled wood. "I don't think."

"Fine, whatever, your childhood sweetheart is pregnant." Dustin rolls his eyes, and he leans back in own chair then, across from Mike, "Your 'girl next door'. The yin to your yang. The companion to your Doctor."

"If anything she'd be the Doctor and I'd be the companion," Mike mumbles, gaze settled on his textbook, "But, you know, she's not my girlfriend."

"Well, now she definitely isn't. Somebody else called dibs." The shorter boy says, and he's so confident in his words that Mike almost wants to laugh, right in his face, finger wagging and all. "I bet it was Troy. Older guys always like the weird, younger chicks. You know, the ones that look like they could cut you in half with just a *look*? And El's a total weirdo."

"She's not weird."

Dustin shrugs, and he holds his hands up defensively, "I'm just relaying that the cheer squad was saying at lunch earlier."

"You shouldn't listen to them, you know. They're all airheads." Mike reasons, and he dares a look over at Dustin. He swallows then, blinks, "It's not true, anyway."

"She's not gestating?"

(Ew.)

"I mean," he starts, brows raising as he stammers out a, "Maybe, I don't know." Mike offers, lame, "And don't call it that. *That's* weird."

Ignoring him, Dustin just casually rests his elbows on the library desk, fingers tapping against his chin thoughtfully. "It has to be Troy. That guy has a reputation for forgetting rubbers."

"It wasn't."

"I thought you said you didn't know if she was pregnant."

"I don't, but like, I don't know, if she was then it definitely wouldn't be his." Mike argues, and he flips over the cover of his math textbook

then, slamming it shut, "Trust me."

His friend only eyes him carefully, thumb smoothing along his jaw. He considers Mike for a moment watching as the taller boy fidgets in his seat, legs jittery beneath the table. "It was you." Dustin grins, pointing his finger in Mike's face accusingly, and he shouts, "You fertilized her!"

"Jesus!" Mike scoots back in his chair, and he swipes his book up from the desk with a groan, "Can you not shout that?" He pulls a face, whacks Dustin's hand away when his finger nears Mike's face, "Stop!"

"Dude!"

"Dustin." Mike grits his teeth and he sends his friend a warning look, "You can't tell anyone."

Hands flying back up once again, Dustin blinks, innocent and childlike. He nods head, offering a simple, "I swear on Chewbacca's life."

Mike scowls, and he makes to sit back down then, cautiously placing his textbook back on the desk, "Seriously."

"Serious." The shorter boy reassures, and then his face erupts into a smile and he's baring his teeth. He scrunches his nose, waits until Mike is once again seated before he whispers, "Did you stop wearing underpants?"

"What?" The black haired boy asks.

"I heard it raises your sperm count." Dustin informs him, all knowing, "I'm totally gonna start doing that."

"I didn't do that, no. And, you know, no, don't do that." Mike shakes his head, and he takes a deep breath, "Don't do anything."

Dustin smirks, "Or anyone?"

(Shit.)

"So are you gonna get married?"

"Huh?"

"You know, because you're having a kid together. You're probably gonna wanna settle down." Dustin reasons, and his gasps, "Oh, man, you should totally grow a mustache. Or some scruff at least. I reckon you could pull it off. Chicks love it."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind." Mike mutters, rolling his eyes.

"You must be Jane."

There's a pair of hands wrapping her own then, tugging and inviting, and El steps over the threshold to the Brenner's house. The girl offers the smallest of smiles, brushing fallen curls from her eyes, "People actually call me El."

The woman - tall with dirty blonde hair and an overpriced manicure - frowns, but the million dollar smile never fades, "They do?" She finally drops her hands, now that they're in what El can only presume is the living room, and El immediately shoves them into the pockets of her jeans, ruffling up her skirt, "Why is that?"

"It's an old pre-school thing." She starts, following the woman into the seating area, "I totally face-planted on the playground, and I could never say the word 'fell' for some reason. I could just say 'ell' so it kinda stuck, I guess." El shrugs, and she sits down on the sofa opposite Terry Ives-Brenner.

Hopper comes into the fold then, after exchanging a tepid welcome with the man of the house - the sterile one of the two, El reckons. He's some handsome years older than Terry, all white-haired and six feet tall. El thinks he looks like Steve Martin, if Steve Martin went to work in fancy suits and shiny leather shoes.

"So," Terry clasps her hands together, and she drops them to her lap once her legs cross. She smiles in El's direction, tilting her head to her side and it's only then that El notices the other woman in the room. She's sat in a nearby chair, a hefty looking file in her hands. "This is Connie." Terry explains, "She's our attorney."

El frowns, and she leans into Hopper then, mumbling, "Did we need one of those?"

"I sure hope not." Hopper says, and he forces a smile, nudging her back into her seat.

"It's nice to meet you, Jane." Connie says, and she simply lifts in finger in greeting, "There's no need to worry. I'm simply here as a formality."

Nodding, Hopper breathes out a loaded breath, "Thank goodness for that." He chuckles.

"Why don't you tell us about yourself, Jane?" The man asks, and El's hereby gonna refer to him as Brenner because she's not a fan of his first name - it reminds her too much of Steve Martin.

Mouth widening at the invitation, El leans forward in her seat, one hand clutching the arm of the cream, cloth sofa, "There's not really much to tell." She begins, a shoulder raising as eyes flicker back and forth between the couple, "I mean, I'm fresh out of juvie so I'm a little behind on what's happening in the world."

Terry's right hand reaches out to smack her husband's chest then, and she gasps - a tad too dramatically. El smirks, and Hopper has to roll his eyes.

"You'll have to forgive her. My daughter has a terrific sense of humor." He explains, "One of her many gifts."

"Ah," Brenner nods, "I see." He smiles then, baring sharp white teeth that match the crisp cleanliness of his shirt. "Should we be expecting any more of these gifts to be greeting us?"

El grimaces, "I mean, I have a pretty wicked sense of style so there's that. Your kid'll probably come out decked head to toe in stripes and knitwear." She tells them, watching as Terry's small smile reappears. "It's kind of a thing of ours."

"Yours being you and the baby's father?"

El nods, wide-eyed, "Yeah." She plucks at her t-shirt then, stretching

it out despite its already large fit on her small frame, "This is his." She pauses, considering, "Come to think of it, this was the *one*." She swallows, looks up at the pair with a flush to her cheeks, "You know, the ceremonial t-shirt."

"You stole it?"

"Yeah, but it's cool." She shrugs, "I mean, he still has my underwear so..."

Hopper's face falls to his hands then, and he audibly groans, "Jane."

"I mean, he was ready to go. I'm surprised I even go it off of him in the first place." She snorts, "Not that I'm complaining or anything, you know. I was kind of the mastermind of the whole tryst."

Her dad can only sigh, shoulders heavy as he takes a deep breath. "El."

After a beat, Brenner speaks up again, this time with his hands clapping together, "Jane," he starts, and he rests a comforting hand on his wife's knee, "How far along are you?"

"You mean like in life?" El blinks, "I'm seventeen."

"No, no." Terry shakes her head, smiling once again as though her husband's wrinkly old hand has brought her back to life, "How far along in the pregnancy are you?"

"Oh. I'm like ten weeks, nearly eleven." El says, nodding as she pouts, lips plump.

"That's perfect. You're nearing your second trimester." The blonde says, and El's pretty sure she's been studying or something, "My friends tell me the first trimester is always the hardest to get through."

The girl shifts in her seat, "I've been fine. I mean, I've puked in a couple vases here and there, but other than that," she says.

"So," Hopper cuts in, stopping her before she can say anything else to shove her foot even deeper in her mouth, "How does this work? Does

she just sign the papers or, what?"

"Well," Terry starts, and she shares a look with her husband. Out of the corner of her eye, El can see Connie 'the attorney' shuffling some papers, "We're willing to have an open adoption." She swallows a breath, "If that's something you want."

"Open adoption?" Hopper asks, and he reaches past El to retrieve the paperwork that the Brenner's lawyer hands over. He inspects the papers thoroughly, chewing at his bottom lip, "You want her to stay in contact?"

"Only if she wants to." Terry explains, holding up a finger, and she shoots the brunette a look, "Jane?"

El pulls a face, and she tempts a glance down at the papers in her dad's lap, catching some words. "I mean," she starts, placing a hand over her stomach as her the space between her brows creases, "Don't I just have the thing? I thought I was supposed to just squeeze it out and leave it on a church doorstep for you to come and collect or something biblical like that."

"I see."

"Is that not how this works?"

"How was it?"

"The sex?" El blinks, and she flips over another page of her magazine, "I mean, you were fine. It's not like I had much to compare you to anyway."

"No, I didn't," Mike licks his lips, and he settles down in front of her then, cross-legged on the grass with his hands between his thighs. "The meeting yesterday? With the couple."

"Oh! That." She sits up, back sliding against the damp ground, "It was great. They were cool, I guess." El tells him, and she spends a good moment just staring at his face, watching as his smile dips, fades. "The kid's in good hands."

"People know."

"That our lapse in judgement is gonna be in good hands? How?"

Mike sighs, and he leans closer to her to whisper, "That you're pregnant."

"I figured. That explains why Troy the the Human Boner was giving me looks earlier."

"People think it's his." Mike informs her, and he picks at a blade of grass then.

The girl's face contorts, and she kicks her legs out in front of her, crossing her ankles by Mike's backside, "Ew, why?" She feigns a shudder, blinking as she looks up at the sky, "That fucker better not be claiming it is."

"He's not. I don't think." Mike says, and he dares a look over at her, admiring the way her face beams in the afternoon sunlight, "Should I tell people?"

"If you want," she taps her fingers against the grass, and her eyes catch on Max approaching them in the distance, "Does it really matter?"

"Well, yeah."

"Why?"

"Because," Mike starts, and he can't help but pause, "You're, you know," and he gulps.

(Coward.)

"Bitch, people know you're pregnant." Max drops down beside the girl, and she kicks Mike in the knee teasingly, grinning when he grabs her foot and stops her from doing it again, "Spermy." She waggles her brows, flicking hair over her shoulder. "Stacy's telling everyone you got knocked up at her party last month."

"Please, if anybody used a dud rubber at her party, it was her." El

mocks, "Who still has sex at a high school party? That's so last generation."

"I'm pretty sure more people have sex at parties than they do in their deadbeat dad's recliner." Max kicks the tall boy again, and he frowns.

"You told her?"

"She wormed her way into my head." El explains, "Did you hear apparently I screwed Troy?"

"Yeah, I heard that." Max grins, and she curls her legs beneath her, "Lucas punched him in the face. It was awesome." She looks over at Mike, "You're welcome."

"That's dude's always wanted me. You know jocks totally have a thing for freaky girls."

"Are you calling yourself a freaky girl?" Max stifles a laugh, raising a brow, "How freaky is she, Wheeler? Are we talking handcuffs or feather boas?"

"So Lucas knows?" El asks, interrupting. The redhead nods, and she points a finger and nods again. "Damn it, Maximo."

"And Dustin."

"Damn it, Wheels."

Mike shrugs, lying back on the patchy plot of grass beneath him, "He won't tell anyone." He reaches out, wraps his palm around El's ankle. "I don't think. If he does, I'll kill him."

"You'd rather kill him than just admit you got your girlfriend pregnant?" Max pries, and she shoves his shoulder with the ball of her hand.

"Not my girlfriend," Mike reminds her, and El nods, confirms.

"That's depressing, man. That's so bleak." El closes her eyes, "You're making me depressed."

"Yeah, you're such a *bleaker*, Wheeler." She jokes, barely letting a second fly by before she asks, "Hey, you guys wanna hang out later?" She pulls her hair up into a ponytail, stretching out her arms, "Lucas got tickets to that new sappy romance movie. We're gonna throw popcorn at the people making out."

"Wouldn't you just be throwing popcorn at yourself then?" Mike jests. He smirks, moving back, when the girl goes to kick him again.

"I would but I don't want to." El says, and she flicks an eye open, "I don't think I have a strong enough gag reflex these days to watch people play tonsil hockey for two hours."

"She says as she daydreams about boning Wheeler's skeletal bod." Max mumbles.

(Mike kicks her now.)

"She's not wrong."

"What?"

5. Five

"I don't know why they didn't just adopt before now, you know." El says, and she slurps at her soda. "It's not like there isn't already an endless sea of orphans in China or whatever."

As it turned out, she went to go see the movie. And it sucked.

Max spent most of the entire time swapping spit with Lucas and letting good (and extremely overpriced!) popcorn go to waste. And, because her best friend was a bit of a slut and apparently refused to detach herself from her boyfriend for even one second, El had been relegated to the middle row of the movie theater - with Mike, because apparently he hadn't had much else to do that day either. Well, either that or he'd tagged along for her benefit, in which case...

(Why the room was packed and so many people came out to watch some sappy, almost grotesque sob fest of a film, El will never know. People are such suckers for romance.)

So, naturally, once they'd left The Hawk and Lucas had slung his arm around Max, slipped his hand inside her back pocket and asked everyone what the plan was, El could only roll her eyes and drag everyone in direction of the diner. And it wasn't like they'd complained. They'd just found a corner booth in the diner, a couple blocks away from the movie theater, and the rest was history.

Looking back, El realizes just how long it's been since everyone was in one place. Granted, Dustin and Will still aren't here, but at least two thirds of the party are back together. For how long, she has no idea. And if she's being truthful, she kind of misses just hanging out in Mike's basement with everyone, talking shit and playing video games; you know, back before Will transferred schools and Max *really* matured and Lucas joined the baseball team. Back when they were still sophomores and Mike hadn't admitted he was, like, totally in love with her yet.

(Okay, so he hasn't *admitted* it yet, but...)

And she's barely seen her step-brother in days, but if she had to bet

on it, she'd guess he was around hanging around somewhere, probably graffitiing the back of an old department store with the other 'art freaks' or whatever. If she didn't hear him sneak in past curfew every night, explaining himself to Joy with some lame ass excuses and proceeding to raid the fridge of all leftovers and juice cartons, she'd be almost certain he'd moved out. Ever since he dropped out of high school and their parents let him sign up for art school, Will had been... different.

(Meaning, he totally came into his own, and out of the closet.)

"Well, maybe they wanted a kid from close to home." Lucas tries, because apparently he's been brought up to speed on everything regarding her and Wheeler and the defunct condom. (El doesn't know if she should thank or throttle her best friend.) "So they could really connect with it and stuff?"

"I can't tell if that's xenophobic or just very American of you." El says, and her softy pouts with a glance down at her belly, "Maybe they're racist."

Mike pulls his face, and his hands slide into the front pockets of his cords as he leans back in the booth, "Why would they be racist? They should be grateful."

"I don't know, I'm just theorizing." The girl shrugs, and she glances down at her belly then, a hand flying to her chest, fingers splayed across her sternum. "Oh."

"Oh, my God, is it kicking?" Lucas reaches a hand out, as though he's going to past his girlfriend to have a feel of her stomach, but Max stops him before he can, her palm wrapping around his wrist. She glares at the boy, and he retracts his arm with an understanding nod and a smile.

El shakes her head, light brown curls swaying with the movement, "No, it's way too early for that. I think it's just heartburn." She swallows a breath, "Like I ate the beef too quickly or something." The brunette says, and she knows Max is just *dying* to say something witty. Her hand lingers over her stomach, not daring to even touch the cotton t-shirt covering the barely-there bump. "I don't know, I

should probably buy a book or something. See what happens and when it happens"

"You could borrow one from the library." Mike offers, and his brows raise in suggestion, "You know, 'cause it's... less longterm."

"Smart thinking, bean sprout." El smiles, teeth baring, and she rests back against the cramped booth with a sigh. She folds her legs up beneath her on the seat, soles of her shoes stretching out an already growing tear in the leather, "You wanna come with me?"

Max snorts, "He already did."

"El!"

The shout comes from the other end of the diner, way back by the entrance, and El whips her head around then, peering over the back of the booth to see her stepbrother sashaying in through the door, the bell dangling above his head. His feet trail, and his satchel is swung carelessly over his right shoulder, dangling by his left side. His hair's a mess, almost like he hasn't brushed it in days, but anything is better than those oh-so-very-nineties curtains he'd been sporting for years, she thinks.

The brunette grips the back of the leather seating, unintentionally causing Mike to shift to the side with a sharp jab of her shoulder, "William." Her fingers curl, tighten around the booth, and she beams up at him (childishly) as he approaches their table.

"When were you gonna tell me?" Will pulls his bag from over his side then, the patchwork satchel falling to the floor with a thud. He kicks it beneath the greasy table with the toe of his left tennis pump, and before anyone knows it, he's squeezing himself in next to Lucas, snatching a leftover French fry from the basket in the middle of the table.

(Speak of the prideful devil and he shall rise.)

El gulps, but she only half means to. She shifts in her seat, carefully distancing herself from Mike, "If you were home more often-"

"Are you being serious right now?" Will squints, snarling, but his

voice never raises. "You're serious? You're gonna blame this on me?"

"Blame what on you?"

"You're gonna blame *you not telling me* on me." He clears up, eyeing her from across the booth, "You definitely can't blame me for your little lapse in judgement."

"It wasn't a lapse in judgement, it was a faulty rubber." Mike points out, brows knitting as his Adam's apple bobs in irritation.

"One that didn't smell or taste of raspberry and apple." El adds.

Lucas snaps his fingers, eyes blown wide as he smiles over at the pregnant girl, "Hey, thanks for those, by the way."

Max elbows her boyfriend in the rib, lips drawn thin, "Shh."

"I had to hear it from Weird Wally, by the way."

El rolls her eyes, "Look, I'm sorry if you little art friends found out before you. It's not like I've been parading around town with a plaque around my neck."

"You might as well have. You're the town harlot."

"Harlot, really?"

Will nods, grins, "Cystic Sally said one of the girls on the cheer-squad called you that."

"Have they nothing better to do than talk about my love life?"

"Love life?" Mike squeaks.

Max perks up, whispering in El's direction, "Looks like everyone in town heard about the party in your panties."

"They're probably just surprised it wasn't you that got-"

"What yourself, Kneeler Wheeler."

"Kneeler?" Mike pulls a face, visibly at a loss, "What the hell does that

have to do-

The redhead gets in face, "Girls talk, Wheeler!"

"Max!"

Will rolls his eyes, Mike sinks into his seat, and Lucas just beams, eyes darting back and forth between the two girls, "God, I've missed this."

(All that's missing is Dustin.)

"You're home early."

It's quarter past eleven, and Hopper is the only one sat at the dining room table when El comes home that night. Will runs straight up the stairs, shouting goodnight in the background like some kind of hermit who's always to be heard but never seen.

"Am I?" She pulls out the seat in front of her dad, the wood scratching on the tiled floor beneath the table. El plops herself down into the chair, arms stretching out and hanging by the rounded stool, "I thought you'd want me home and, like, tucked-in or whatever by seven." She wiggles her eyebrows, nibbles at her bottom lip thoughtfully. "Thought I was being rebellious for a change."

"I'm gonna assume you're joking." Hopper stares her down, an eyebrow raising in consideration. "Where were you anyway?"

"Out." She shrugs.

He sighs, "with?"

"People."

"The redhead or the sperm donor?"

"That's not nice." El tells him, and she shakes her head with just the slightest of smiles. "You know it's not."

"Right, sorry." Her dad says, waving a hand in apology, but she

knows he isn't finished. The corners of his mouth curl, and he's unable to stop himself, "I forgot she prefers the term 'carrot top'."

"Dad."

"Fine." Hopper grumbles, and his arms fold over his chest then, chest puffing out in mock exasperation, "So, what are we calling the cul-de-sac kid this week? Boyfriend? Beau? He ask you out on a date yet or do I have to kick his ass?"

With a quirked brow, El looks him over in concern, "Are you having a stroke? Should I call someone?"

"Humor me, kid. I just wanna know. I'm not asking for the juicy details or whatever it is you miscreants call them, but I'm curious." He starts, casual and relaxed. But she doesn't buy it, not for one second. "You know, he did knock my daughter up. Least he can do is ask her out on a real date."

(His tone of voice is somehow bitter and cool at once. El doesn't know how he does it.)

"Even if he did, you don't know for sure that I'd say yes." The girl explains, and her lips draw thin in jest, "Maybe I'm not the kind of girl that dates."

"Then who are you?" There's a half-empty beer bottle next to her father, one she's sure he'd been nursing before she waltzed in ten minutes ago. "What does a girl like you want, if not rose petals on bedspreads on prom night?" He teases.

"I don't really know what kind of girl I am. Or, well, person. I've never really known what I wanted out of life, you know, I just," she brushes hair from her face, fallen curls sweeping behind her ears as her lips purse in thought, "I guess I just know what I *can* have and I go for it. Gets me by."

"You sound just like your father."

She smiles, "Yeah, I guess I do." El nods, and he grins in return, hand reaching over to grasp her own. Her hand's small in his, childlike and petite. "Hey, do you happen to know if my dad also got pregnant

when he was a seventeen year old girl? I could really do with some advice right about now."

"Not sure on the whole pregnancy thing, but I think he can probably muster up some wisdom from somewhere. Just lemme him down this first," his right hand unwinds from hers then, and he's downing the rest of his beer before she can even count to five. "All right, kiddo. Hit me." The green bottle slams down with a slight 'thunk', and he's all ears for her now.

After a moment, one she spends staring at the lapel of this beer and ruminating her words in her mouth before speaking them into existence, El finally breaks her silence. Plump lips part, eyes scrunch, and she tightens her hold on her dad's hand, seeking comfort. "How do you know if you love someone?" Her free hand flies up to her face then, forefinger running along her Cupid's bow in faraway, absent-minded curiosity, "Like, actual love? Not infatuation."

"You know the difference?" Hopper asks her, and he leans closer to get a better look at her face, "El?"

"I mean, yeah. I figure infatuation is kind of like a crush. Right? Like, you can't stop thinking about someone and you just kinda wish that they were always around." El tries, and her shoulder rise and her confidence dips, only slightly. "I think if you're infatuated with someone, you just obsesses over them, and force yourself to get to know them way too quickly. Like, you wanna know what they like and what they hate. And you wanna share the same interests, even if you don't actually like the same things they do."

"And?"

"And if you love someone, then you love them despite the differences between you both. Like, if they like beer but you're more of a wine girl yourself, you're not gonna force yourself to like beer and stop drinking wine, you know? And if they love fresh mint Tic-Tacs but you prefer orange Tic-Tacs, it's not going to matter because you're you and they're them and there's an understanding. You'll get used to the fresh mint and they'll get used to the orange. And maybe you start to like mint Tic-Tacs too, one day, or maybe you don't. It doesn't matter because you know who they are, and you've accepted them

despite all the things that set you apart. My point is, is that love is mutual, and it's equal, and fair. Infatuation is just... uneven. And it doesn't really mean anything."

"Kid, I think you just cleared it up for yourself."

"I did?"

"Yeah," Hopper nods, eyes wide and a smile on his lips, "I mean, I'm no expert but I'm pretty sure cul-de-sac kid's the one harboring all the breath mints."

"He does."

"And you *were* talking about him?"

(Obviously.)

"I mean," El starts, and she retracts her hand from her father's, "maybe."

"Then, yeah, kid," he breathes out, though it's really more of a sigh of relief, "I think you know the difference. Maybe you should tell him."

"I see." El gulps, despite herself, and her brows dip in realization because *shit! shit! shit!* "And is it absolutely imperative that I do?"

"No." Her dad shrugs, and he makes to stand with a hand on the back of his chair then, "But you'd be an idiot if you didn't."

"Thanks."

He hums in response, a slight shake of the head in tow, "You couldn't have figured this out before you let him get you screw you over, huh."

"He didn't screw me *over*. And, besides, the condom still would've broke, probably." The girl says, nonchalant, calming herself by thinking of events past, "It might've actually broken faster if I had. You know, because if you're more enthusiastic about something, then the speed-"

"Jane!"

6. Six

"Michael."

"Why is *he* here?" The words slip out before he can stop them, and Mike only half regrets letting them fall.

The look on his dad's face is anything but *happy*. Ted Wheeler's usual blank expression is nowhere in sight, instead replaced by something akin to displeasure — or, well, at least not total indifference.

Folding his arms over his chest, Mike nudges up sleeves of his hoodie with the balls of his hands. His eyes don't lift off of his father's however, and it's only when his mom starts talking that he breaks his stare.

"Michael!"

"What?" Mike snaps, turning to face his mom with a frown. His brows furrow, wrinkle, and a corner of his mouth turns up, "I'm just curious." He raises and lowers one shoulder, "He didn't even come home for Holly's talent show last week."

"Your father and I need to talk to you."

"Please don't tell me you're getting back together." Mike says, honest as he can be, and his eyes widen almost in plea, "That divorce was the best birthday present you ever gave me."

"It's not about *us*, Michael." Karen simply tells him, and she shoots her estranged husband a look that Mike can't read. "I think we all need to sit down and have a frank discussion about recent—"

Mike cuts her off then, shoulders suddenly stiff by the implication, "About what?"

(*Stay cool. Stay calm. Calm down, Mike!* It's totally Will's voice in his head.)

"About you, son." Ted says, taking a step toward Mike with his hands in his back pockets. His eyebrows raise, and Mike notices then just

how *lost* he looks. So, obviously, he doesn't know.

But his mom totally knows, and Mike isn't surprised in the slightest. It's actually pretty amazing that they made it more than a week without the ever-watchful, ever-eavesdropping Mindful Moms sussing them out. Mike just doesn't know how long she's known, and it's that part that actually kind of scares him. What, has she just been silently monitoring him?

"Your mother says you have something important to tell me."

(Crap. Crap. Crap. Abort. Run, Mike. Dustin's voice now.)

"It's not," Mike starts, pausing to hold back a cackle. It's not so much a laugh as it is an awkward shriek, a breath. He just crinkles his nose, head shaking with a shrug, "It's not important anymore."

"Anymore?" Karen quirks a brow, and suddenly she's close enough to rest a hand on her son's shoulder. It's not comforting, and it's not reassuring. "Mike." She has that condescending tone to her voice now, and it does everything but appease him.

Karen Wheeler can be a total nightmare when she wants to be. She gets people banned from book club for not finishing their readings on time. She had the librarian fired for not filing something correctly *one time*. She sued a small business — and won — when she found a single peanut in her granola mix. (No one knows how it got there, but Karen Wheeler couldn't have given less of a shit.)

"Look, you clearly already know what happened so why don't you just tell him and save me the struggle?" The young man grits his teeth, and he forces down a deep breath, a gulp, "Please."

"So it's true?" His mom eyes him carefully, almost like she's studying him (again, because that's all she seems to do lately.)

"You know it's true. That's why you're cornering me."

Mike can tell she's on the brink of just calling up Joyce Byers and throttling her for *'letting this happen'*... as though she isn't just as much to blame. If Joyce is to cop some of the fall for this, then so should she.

(It's like Joyce gave El a bunch of condoms and told her to go wild or anything.)

"That girl-

Ted interrupts her, as clueless as ever, and Mike is reminded of a time when his dad still lived at home and *still* didn't know what was happening with anyone, ever, "What girl?"

"El."

Karen scoffs, "Jane." She shoots Ted a glance, batting her lashes as though her feminine wiles are going to get through to his last few brain cells. If that were the case, they never would've imploded and Mike wouldn't be at least partially emotionally stunted. "The police chief's daughter."

"Jim Hopper's girl." Ted voices, and Mike can tell he meant it as a question. Why should he remember the chief had a daughter at all? Why would he remember the name of one of his son's oldest, better friends? "Pretty girl?"

Karen waves a hand about before placing it on her hip, all manicured fingernails and now meaningless gold bands, "Strange girl." She says, with a flick of her hair, "Pretty strange."

"Pretty and strange." Mike mumbles, and he shuffles a few feet backward until the backs of his shoes meet the lower steps. Plopping himself down on the bottom one, he rests his elbows on his knees, carving bone into muscle, and he drops his face into his hands.

"What about this girl?" Ted's hands slip from his pockets, and just when Mike thinks he's going to cross them — all fatherly and patriarchally and authoritatively — he clasps them behind his back and bounces on his shiny, glossy, scratched-bottom work shoes. Mike can't help but smile, ducking his head with a disbelieving shake.

"Ask your son."

"Why?"

"Because it's his fault, Ted!"

Slipping his fingers past his hairline, Mike pulls on the strands, scrunching them in his fist in irritation. "Fault?" he whispers, mostly to himself, but he can *feel* the burn of his mother's stare above him, practically burning holes into his scalp.

"My God," Ted starts, and Mike has to look up to see his mouth move, to make sure his dad's actually *saying* the words Mike thinks he's hearing, "is she pregnant?"

(Ding, ding ding! We have a winner, Wheeler! That's totally Max.)

There's an awkward silence then, and Mike decides that now is probably the right time to start talking. His mom's not going to, and his dad is just looking for answers.

"Yeah." He finally says, words filling an uncomfortable pause. His elbows slide from the curve of his knees almost accidentally, and Mike rubs a hand over his jaw from the ache. "She's pregnant."

"And it's yours?"

Karen shoots the man a look, and it screams bloody murder, "Obviously it's his, Ted!" She exclaims, "Why else would you need to know?"

"I don't-" Ted holds his hands up defensively, and Mike actually, full-on has to laugh now.

As expected, it doesn't go down well. His dad just looks confused, his mom sends him her signature daggers — that are more like claws — and Mike is totally *done*.

"Michael."

"No." Mike shakes his head, resigned, and suddenly he's pushing up to stand. He matches his father in height, a hand wrapped around the banister as he digs into his left pocket for his car keys. "No, you know, this is just great. Let's just tell dad to come home after like, what, a fucking year so we can disappoint him?" The boy swallows, Adam's apple bobbing in silence, "Because you are."

"I'm what?"

"Disappointed." Mike explains, and he slides his middle finger through a keyring, "You can just say it. You can say you're disappointed that I gave up on my future and got a girl pregnant. But, you know, it doesn't even matter anymore." He stresses the word, eyes his mother.

"Has she—"

"No." He blinks, "She's giving it up. There's a couple. They're pretty dope, apparently, so you can, you know, calm down."

"Mike."

"So like, I'm not having a kid, and you're not going to be grandparents, and I'll probably still go to college child-free. And, okay, I messed up, and it's probably my fault because I didn't check the condom and she was just *there*, and I'm like, in love with her and she—"

"You're in love with this girl?" It's his dad's voice that breaks him off mid-thought, mid-sentence, and *that* has Mike stunned into silence. It's not his mom trying to dissuade him, or tell him that 'surely you're wrong'. No.

No, it's Ted who's surprised by his son's outburst of an admission. It's Ted who sounds almost in awe.

(You really walked right into that one, man. Definitely Lucas' voice.)

With a sigh — half in relief that he's finally spoken the words into existence, and half in annoyance at himself for having made the feeling *real* — Mike grinds his teeth together as his lips part, all dry and speechless. He runs his tongue along the surface, wincing at the bitter taste of his own flesh. Mike gulps, voices, "Sadly."

"Karen," the deadbeat patriarch of the Wheeler family turns to wards his wife then, and he seems to ruminate over his words for just a *second* before saying "It's not like she's a bimbo."

"Ted!" Karen squawks, and she's rambling, ranting on about respect and responsibilities, and how it changes nothing that Mike *thinks* he's in love with 'the girl' and how they're 'being stupid for thinking they

can do this'.

Seeing an opportunity, and one hundred percent through with listening to the disharmony that is his mom's disapproval and his dad's ignorance, Mike tightens his grip on the set of keys in his palm. He sneaks around his mother until he's closer to the front door, the sound of the rain outside tapping against the doorstep. And he's just a couple of feet away from opening it when he utters, "Be home later."

(And then he hears El.)

(And he smiles.)

"Mrs Byers," Mike thinks they're past the point of a warm hug. She's known him since he was a toddler and yet there's something strangely unfamiliar, almost cold, about the way she greets him.

Joyce has a grasp on the front door, and she rubs the ball of her hand against the splintered wood. Looking back over her shoulder, she tilts her head, seemingly eyeing someone or something in the background.

"Are you here to see El?"

Mike nods, slow as his eyebrows rise, "Is she here?"

"She's out."

"By herself?"

"Yeah."

"Is that," he stops, thinks to add, "is that recommended?"

"She's up the duff, Mike. She's not viral. I doubt anybody's gonna catch immodesty."

"She's not immodest."

Joyce presses one elbow into the wood, rolling up the sleeve of her crooked arm with her other hand. "Well, she's not modest."

"It was one time."

"That's all it takes."

For some reason, Will's mom is being kind of hostile and Mike is at a loss as to why. She'd let him in last time he came over looking for El, so why is she being so frosty now?

"Do you know where she went?" Mike asks, and he tosses a hand through his hair, black and unruly.

Joyce frowns, and her frowns aren't as deep as Mike expects them to be given the situation she's been put in. "She's out back, I just told you."

"Oh." With a slump of his shoulders, "so I can..." he trails off, and he wags a finger towards the house as some sort of question.

The woman mutters somehow below her breath he doesn't quite catch, but she shuffles away from the door — in her slippers, Mike notes — and she pulls a cigarette from the pocket of her cardigan.

"Should you be—"

"I'm not the one knocking girls up with my foetus penis, am I?" Joyce slips the cigarette passed her lips then, and she plucks a lighter up from the table beside the door just as Mike slips through. "Watch your mouth, baby daddy."

Shit-stunned into silence, Mike just follows her through the Byers-Hopper household, hands in his pockets as he walks over cables and around chairs full of laundry.

"Jim will be home soon." Joyce tells him after a moment, pushing the backdoor open a tad. She ushers him outside, a teasing grin on his face now. "If I were you, I'd either hide in a bush or be gone by then."

"In a bush?"

"Not my step-daughter's. Please."

"Are fort fetishes a side effect of pregnancy or something?"

"Huh?" Looking up, El squints. She takes in the boy's face with a slight smile, and then she shrugs, "Oh. I don't know, maybe. I haven't gotten my handbook in the mail yet."

"So you haven't been to the library yet?"

(It's been a week, Mike.)

"I haven't really had a chance. You know, between school and vitamin popping and all that." El explains, and she brings straightens her out in front of her, admiring the sheet pulled tight above her. It's basically a pretty neat hammock hanging from the rope of two swings, and she's lying beneath it on soggy, damp grass.

(Petrichor. The smell of earth after its rained. Her favorite thing on earth, he knows.)

"Do you know what 'fort' means in French?"

"You mean aside from also meaning 'fort'?" Mike smirks, nudging her shoulder ever so softly as he plops down beside her. The girl's eyes dart toward him but she doesn't turn, doesn't move an inch. "Strong."

"Exactly." She clicks her tongue, the wide space between her eyebrows wrinkling as she gets lost in thought, "Maybe I use them for strength."

"Not to burst your bubble but I'm pretty sure that isn't how blanket forts got their name."

"I knew it was too deep to be true." She whispers, sounding annoyed. But Mike's smarter than that.

And then suddenly he says, "You look pregnanter."

She stills beside him, the hand she'd been absentmindedly raising in the air halted midway, "Are you saying I look fat?"

"No, I'm saying you look... I don't know, however people say pregnant women look."

"Like they're glowing." The brunette tells him, and she hiccups down a gasp, "Well, shitballs then. If I'm glowing that must mean that I'm like, really, freaking obviously pregnant. Actually, you know, maybe Steve will give me food next time I go to the Fair Mart."

"Steve gives free food to Dustin." Mike informs her, "You should just take it. He wouldn't sell you out."

"Steve." She rolls her eyes, "He was the first one to know."

"Really?"

El nods, and she snuggles closer so her head's resting against Mike's shoulder. He smells of pine and pool chlorine, and she totally loves it. El smirks, "I did the test in the little toilet at the Mart and I think maybe he clocked it when I peed on like a gazillion pee sticks."

"Oh."

"Steve would say I'm glowing."

"Steve creeps on high school girls and he's like twenty-three."

"Still." She turns on her side, facing him with closed eyes. "He'd say I was glowing."

"*Glowing*." Mike repeats the word, trying it out on his tongue. Then his heart beat slows when she flutters her lashes, looking at him with a small smile, kind of shy and almost sly.

"That's such a strange word to use."

"Glowing?"

"It's weird. Like, just say nice or something."

"Pretty?" Mike offers, and he takes a deep breath, shudders when she places her hand flat on his chest, right over his slowing, mellowed heartbeat.

"Are you still gonna think I'm pretty when I'm like, huge and everything?" El grins, cheeks puffing out as she sucks in a breath.

"Even when I've got swollen ankles and back pain." Her eyes blow wide as she blinks, and Mike smiles.

"Yeah." He says, sweet and soft. He pushes himself up to rest back on his forearms, chest heavy as color tints his cheeks, "I always think you're pretty."

El glances up him after a beat, and her face scrunches up in amusement, "You think I'm pretty?"

"I think you're beautiful."

Brows raising almost to her hairline, El feels her lips parting before she can stop them and she gasps. It's not even like it's a surprise because he's told her that before but, still...

She needed that, and she needed it from him.

"Thank you." El rasps, manages, and she reaches over for his touch. El tugs on his arm, fingers wrapping around his wrist as he stretches his arm across her abdomen, thumb gently caressing the rough denim of her skirt.

Mike gaze drifts down to their feet, watching as she knocks the rubber caps of her canvas pumps against his, squeaky and off-white and muddy and *her*. He bites at the inside of his right cheek for a moment, teeth sharp and nervously attacking the skin there before he breathes out, "You're welcome."

"For the record," El begins, and she closes her eyes with a smirk starting on her lips, "you're pretty *pretty*, too."

"I am?" Mike snorts, literally, and El tightens her hold on his hand. She nods, and Mike feels her head move beside him, hair dancing along his exposed collarbone, "Okay."

"Yeah, you're totally boss." Threading her fingers through his, El opens her eyes to stare down at their hands. She purses her lips in glee, forces back a full-blown grin, "You're like, the cheese to my macaroni."

"Is that good?"

"They go hand-in-hand, Wheeler."

7. Seven

"It's a miracle you haven't lost the thing with the amount of crap you eat." Max pops another piece of churro in her mouth, lips audibly smacking together.

"Wow, well that's," El frowns, "uncalled for." Her head drops onto the back of the wooden seat then, arms hanging freely by her sides as she stares up at the ceiling of the Starcourt mall.

"Don't you have to start eating mushed up food or something real soon? My mom said something about maybe investing in a blender."

"That's- No." El shakes her head before pushing back falling curls. She stuffs loose strands back into her low ponytail, pulling it tight. "I don't think so, at least. I think that's just babies and old people."

"So I'm not gonna have to, like, feed your sloppy peas at lunch then, am I? 'Cause that really wouldn't be a good look for me."

"Wouldn't be too cute for me either, t.b.h."

The redhead snorts, and she pushes up on her feet until her own chair is moving, the old wood creaking as its dragged closer to the table. "Too bad for you. Teen pregnancy isn't cute."

"Mike thinks I'm cute." El reasons, quietly. She shrugs, nonchalant, "Mike thinks I'm-"

"*Beautiful*, I know." With a roll of her eyes, Max nudges her friends in the arm, pulling her from her daze, "You've already told me, like a gazillion times." She raises her brows knowingly when El finally looks at her, "And, besides, you're totally forgetting that Wheeler would find you cute even if you grew like a second head, or started coughing up pube balls."

Still leaning back, El picks up her juice box from the sticky lunch table. Soda was out of the question, apparently. She slurps at the orange juice through the white and red straw, shooting Max a quick sideways glance.

"Why do you hate him so much?"

"I don't hate him," Max shrugs, and El isn't sure if she buys it or not. "I just think he's really stuck-up... and entitled. And when I first got here, he was a total dick to me. He wouldn't even let me join AV Club."

"Hold on," El holds up a finger, interest suddenly piqued, "*You* wanted to be an audio-visual nerd?"

"That was before I realized how lame it was." Max glares at the brunette, nose slightly crinkling as her gaze drifts down to El's tummy.

There's a small, fair, totally-could-pass-as-a-food-baby bump there now. Nobody would know she was five months along if it wasn't for that invisible 'cautionary tale' tramp stamp she's got plastered on her forehead.

"And, anyway, *you* don't get to call them nerds anymore, you know. Not when you and Pencil Dick are, like, playing house or whatever."

"Girls!"

Joyce's voice rings out through the food court then, and she's by the side of their table before either of the girls even has a chance to turn around. She drops two shopping bags down onto the free seat beside El, and she sits herself down next to Max. "You'll never guess what I bought."

She'd left the teens in the food court about an hour before, saying she had errands to run and things to 'get started on'. El wasn't sure what she'd meant, and quite frankly her hunger outweighed her curiosity.

"A basket to send the baby down the river in?"

"I hope it's not condoms, Joyce." Max tilts her head, smoothing a finger across her chin thoughtfully, "El here has something she needs to tell you."

Kicking her friend in the shin and sitting herself into a more upright position, El presses her elbows into the table, bunched-up sleeves of

her plaid shirt digging into her skin. "Please don't tell me it's something for the fetus."

"No, no," Joyce waves a hand about, eyes rolling as her cheeks tint pink, "Just look."

Curiously, El reaches into the first bag without looking at the store name written across the front in big bold letters. Her hand wraps around something soft, almost stretchy. "Did you buy me clothes?" She pulls the item from the bag then, holding it up for the others to see. Max pulls a face, Joyce just nods.

"Better." The woman pulls the sheet of material from El's fingertips, the slat of cloth held up almost proudly. "I'm gonna maternity-proof clothes you already have."

"Cute!" The redhead squeals, half-in mockery and half-in excitement, "El, look, now you can totally shoplift Eggs in your jeans!"

(Godamnit.)

"Can you not yell that, maybe?" El squeaks, and she leans across the table to plaster a hand across her stepmom's mouth. "I still have, like, *a shred* of dignity left."

Max scoffs at that, smirking, "Yeah, no, I think there's only like *one* person in the whole town who doesn't already know you're gestating," she tells her friend, a brow quirked in thought, "but they're like a hundred years old so..."

"Can we please go before the last centennial in Hawkins finds out I'm carrying?"

"Carrying?" Max picks up their squashed juice boxes from the table and she jams them onto her food tray, "You make it sound like you're packing."

"Packing?"

"Like a gun?" the blue-eyed girl explains, "like *packing heat*."

"I am packing." El says, deadpan, "I'm packing the pounds on."

"You look fine, sweetie." Joyce interrupts, shopping bags dragged up her arms right up to her shoulders. She stuffs her hands inside her jacket pockets, pulling on the green parka with a sigh and warning look in Max's direction, "Don't."

"I never said anything!" Max raises her free hand in defense, her left holding a tray practically full of ketchup packets and coated in icing sugar — there's some still around Max's mouth from where she'd jammed a churro in and forgotten to lick away the remnants.

Once Joyce has walked away, a swing in her hips and her hair tucked neatly behind her ears, Max softly grabs El's elbow, wrapping her fingers around the girl's shirt casually as she whispers, "You're packing Wheeler's heat."

"Shut up!"

"Hey, how's Mommy Two Point Nought doing, by the way?" Max nods her head toward Joyce who's already miles head of them, seemingly on a mission, "Lucas said that Mike said she blew up at him a few weeks ago."

El just rolls her eyes, "She didn't blow up. She's just... on edge." Brows furrowing, she adds, "Wouldn't you be?"

"If I married a fine ass police officer and his daughter came home knocked up by the local nerd?" The redhead stifles a laugh, slowly nodding after a beat, lips pursing. She folds her arms across her chest then, taking long strides and licking her lips. She tosses her hair over her shoulder, "Either that or she's going through the ch-"

"Jane?"

It's not Joyce that's calling out to her, but rather a voice El isn't as familiar with. Granted, she's met the woman a handful of times now, and every exchange she's had with the woman is pleasant. But there's something needy about her, something off about her husband.

Max throws an arm around El's shoulders then, tilting her head in curiosity, "Is this the dead egg lady?"

Ignoring her friend's comment, the brunette girl simply walks over to

the woman; a heavy looking box is now resting at her feet (that a short-haired woman has quite literally just *dropped* there), her purse is placed on top of it, and three little paper bags are dangling from her fingertips.

"Hey," El greets her, raising a hand to scratch the back of her neck. She pulls on the baby hairs there, sticking out past her untidy up-do. "I didn't know you shopped here."

(If she had, she would've stopped coming to the mall. Running into the fancy lady who's adopting your *oops* baby when you've just scoffed down three powdered churros and a plate of mayo-covered french fries isn't exactly high on El's bucket list.)

"Oh," Terry Ives-Brenner, with her tan skin and platinum blonde hair, glances down at the box by her feet, and she seems to smile, "I was just running some errands."

It only takes a quick two-second glance at the box to know there's a car seat inside, fit for a newborn once its assembled. It's beige, plain, gender-neutral and expensive-looking.

She's known the sex of the baby for a couple of weeks now, but she's not allowed to say anything because the Brenners want to be surprised. They believe in fate, apparently. El thinks it's some kind of funnily cruel irony — they believe in destiny, but fate willed it so they couldn't bare children of their own. They're relying on a seventeen-year-old high schooler with an average GPA and a messed-up sense of self to gift them their miracle baby. It's actually kind of hilarious; one couple's bundle of joy is another's gaffe.

"How are you feeling?"

It's only then that El realizes she never reacted to Terry, to her answer. So, looking up and stretching her arms out behind her head with a slow, fake yawn, she blinks. "Good. Mostly." One hand lowers to her stomach then, just when the growing bump curves around her hipbones, "I think I'm gonna give birth to the second coming of Rocky."

Terry's eyes seem to light up at that, and the girl can see her fingers

twitching, just aching to reach out and- "Is she- I mean, is *it*-" she shakes her head, catching her blunder. El just shrugs, smiling, feigning passivity.

"Do you wanna feel?" The desire to *feel it kick* was written clear as day on the Brenner lady's face, so El just reaches out and grasps her free hand. She curls her fingers around the older woman's wrist to draw her closer, shuffling forward as her palm settles itself on her belly. The heel of Terry's hand is pressing, just lightly, against her bellybutton, and El has to bite her lip to hold back a gulp.

(This is... odd.)

"Should be any second now." El tells her, looking up to watch as the taller woman's expression changes. Her eyes are a soft hazel color, kind even, and El thinks that maybe the baby will be passable as hers if it comes out bearing its mother's eyes. She knows some adopted kids end up in families where their parents don't look anything like them, but if Terry's eyes are the same as El's, and the baby looks more like her than it does Mike, then maybe everything will be fine for the Brenners - they won't ever have to explain anything.

"Ah," there's a soft fluttering against her tummy then, from the inside outward, almost like butterflies but stronger. The damn kid's a boxer, that's for sure. Terry's eyes just widen as El readjusts her hand, heightening the sensation and making the woman *gasp*, "Can you feel it?"

With a nod, the mother-to-be simply continues staring at El's stomach, and she drops the bags in her other hand to crouch down in front of the girl. Behind her, El can feel the burn of Max's gaze, and she knows just what she's thinking.

(It's fine, really. She's cool with it. Terry Ives-Brenner is gonna be a boss ass mom.)

"Thank you," Terry breathes out, gazing up at El as though she's heaven-sent or something, "for this. For everything." Both hands are splayed out across El's abdomen now, touching and *longing* for another kick. The brunette simply shrugs, and she gnaws at the inside of her bottom lip with a weak smile.

(*This* she can do. While it's funny when the baby kicks her in the gut as she's doing homework, almost like it's agreement with her hatred of the subject, she knows this isn't *for her*. She can deal with that; make peace with the fact that once he's out, and he's crying, and he's a tiny, little, human thing, that he won't be hers. She can handle the goodbye, she thinks.)

(It's the aftermath that's going to hurt.)